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# In Moscow, rumors persist

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## Moscow

From a morass of rumors, chopped-up television footage, and airbrushed photographs — perhaps spiked with a heavy dose of disinformation from the Soviet secret police — Kremlin watchers are still trying to discern the true state of health of Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko.

Mr. Chernenko appears to be doggedly hanging on to power. However, a number of television appearances have only underscored the frailty of his health. And speculation about possible successors to Chernenko has intensified because of the recent prominence of a man thought to have only the slimmest of chances of becoming the Soviet leader — Moscow Communist Party leader Viktor Grishin.

All of these developments have Western Kremlin-watchers here baffled as to what the Kremlin is up to, and why.

"It really is a puzzle," says a senior Western diplomat. "To us, it seems self-defeating."

Indeed, the zigzag course of recent events has confused both foreign observers and Soviet citizens alike.

First, the Kremlin broke with precedent and publicly admitted that Chernenko's health prevented him from delivering a campaign speech.

Then, two days later, Chernenko — looking frail and breathing with difficulty — appeared on Soviet television, breaking a nearly two-month long absence from public view. He spoke only a few words, and needed assistance when standing. Officials claimed the room in which he was photographed was a polling place.

The next day, a picture of him appeared on the front pages of the party-controlled press showing him voting — but the aide who was shown steadying him on television was apparently airbrushed out of the photo.

Three days later, Chernenko again appeared on television. Experts say the film, lasting some five minutes, was heavily edited. Chernenko was shown standing

unaided, although he leaned on the back of a chair. Whereas he had earlier uttered only a few words, this time he read from a prepared text at length.

The locale was not identified, but it appeared to be the same room that had earlier been identified as a polling place. (Some diplomats speculate that both sequences were probably shot in a hospital outside Moscow, where they believe Chernenko is now residing.) This time, however, the furniture was rearranged to give the appearance of a conference room.

Moreover, Chernenko and two other men in the photographs appeared to be wearing the same clothes as they had in the TV film shown three days earlier.

Do the officials have a limited wardrobe? Did they, by an unusual coincidence, all chose to don the same outfits on the same days? Or were the events actually filmed on the same day, yet televised days apart in an effort to keep Chernenko before the public eye?

Western analysts can come up with no definitive answer. But, as one says, "I wouldn't put too many things past them [Soviet officials.]"

Another puzzling point is the role of Mr. Grishin, the Moscow party leader. He delivered Chernenko's election speech in his absence and was shown in both television appearances, at first offering encouragement as Chernenko haltingly voted and later bantering with the

Soviet leader as he was presented with credentials as a member of the Russian parliament.

Some analysts suggest that, as Moscow party leader and a longtime associate of Chernenko, he was merely lending political support to the ailing Soviet leader.

But others speculate that his new prominence means the 70-year-old Grishin is himself a serious contender for the party leadership.

Although lacking one of the requisites for party leader — he is not now serving as a secretary at party headquarters — he is the longest-serving full member of the ruling Politburo. (He was made a full member in 1971.)

Grishin's name had been mentioned earlier as a long-shot choice for party leader, and then only if the older members of the Politburo (the group's average age is 67) were once again unwilling to allow power to pass to a younger generation.

Despite such speculation, many analysts still believe that the front-runner to succeed Chernenko remains 53-year old Mikhail Gorbachev.

Mr. Gorbachev is the No. 2 man on the Politburo, and the youngest of its members.

Still, his ascendancy is not assured. Earlier, rumors were circulating that Chernenko was on the verge of giving up power. In many versions of these rumors, Gorbachev would have taken over as party secretary in mid or late February.

That, of course, has not happened. And Western analysts say the rumors can be traced back to the Soviet secret police, the Committee for State Security (KGB).

Some analysts speculate that Chernenko rallied, and was thus able to fend off pressure to resign. Others suggest that the KGB was involved in a disinformation campaign aimed at obscuring the truth about Chernenko's health. Still others argue that Chernenko's recent appearances are a calculated effort to expose his poor state of health, in order to prepare the Soviet populace for yet another succession in the Kremlin.

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